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20 Years With Stardraw.com

The software company's open architecture facilitates partnering, not competition.

By Kate Blessing

June marked the 20th anniversary of the first software application that began Stardraw.com's evolution. A software-only company, Stardraw has been a part of the industry since the mid '90s, and the company continues

with other manufacturers in the industry without competing with them. That's really important to us."

Before Robinson became involved with Stardraw, he was working with Shuttlesound, a distribution and

"mobbed" at their 10x10 booth. At about the same time, David Snipp, Founder of Stardraw.com, was working in the lighting industry, having spent a number of years previously as a software engineer and architect



Stardraw.com founder David Snipp (right) appointed Rob Robinson CEO in 2012 after 18 years of collaboration.



The Stardraw team has collected many awards over the years, this one from NSCA in 2005. From left: Kevin Harrison (Symbols Manager), Rob Robinson (CEO), David Strawbridge (Senior Software Engineer), David Snipp (Founder).

to evolve. Because Stardraw's product is not backed by any kind of hardware, the company is in a unique position within the industry. Its approach to business is more about building partnerships and working on communication for clients. So far, so good.

"We have always made and kept to a very firm decision not to do hardware," said Rob Robinson, CEO. "It meant that we have stayed in a place where we can coexist and partner



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integration company in the UK in the early '90s. The company won many of the prestigious bids in the region in large part, according to Robinson, due to the company's "fantastic documentation" system. Shuttlesound quickly realized how important and marketable its system was. "In effect, we developed our own documentation system," said Robinson. "And we thought at that time, well, it's been good for us: If we smooth the edges off and add a few things, perhaps it would be a good commercial proposition for other integrators out there in the world."

With this idea in mind, they launched Shuttle CAD at NSCA in 1993. The show went well; as Robinson modestly explained, they were

at Microsoft. Snipp used his programming skills to launch a software division at Starlite Systems Technology, the lighting company he purchased after his stint with Microsoft. He also launched a lighting package called Stardraw 3D around the same time. When Robinson bumped into Snipp at the PLASA show in London in 1994, they decided to partner. "He showed me what his software could do, which was real-time 3D rendering on Windows 3.1," said Robinson. "Which, as everyone knows, was impossible: You could not do real-time 3D rendering on Windows; but *he* could." So Shuttlesound employed Starlite as developer of an OEM engine for the next version of its software, ShuttleCAD 4 for Windows.

After a series of corporate changes, Starlite ended up acquiring the IPR for ShuttleCAD, and in 2000, split the software side of the company off, which set Stardraw.com up as a separate corporate entity. The company, as it stands today, has been incorporated for 13 years as a software-focused business. Privately owned, Stardraw does about 55% of its business in the US, 30% in Europe and the remainder spread through Australasia and Asia Pacific.

Also in 2000, the company recog-

house. The second is OEM software, or custom application development, principally for corporate clients.

“On the OEM side, we have a lot of clients that are manufacturers offering custom-built or custom-configured products. One of the challenges they face is how to give their customers an easy and efficient way to communicate a custom design,” said Robinson. Instead of the manufacturer having to interpret something that might be hand-drawn on a napkin and faxed in, Stardraw’s

abled devices. This seed of innovation became an obsession to Stardraw, which decided that control was (probably) the future, Robinson related.

“We sat down and developed an open architecture universal control platform, which would allow anybody to control any kind of device over any protocol, from anything, anywhere,” said Robinson. Three caveats to this are that the device must be controllable, the protocol for that device should be open, supported and documented, and the device must be



Sound & Communications (October 2010) detailed the installation of 80 screens and Stardraw Control at restaurant/sports bar Park East.



Stardraw Control provides a virtualized interface for mission-critical broadcast routing, monitoring and quality control at Scripps Networks, Nashville TN.

nized and reacted to the convergence of audio and video. “We no longer had audio integrators and video integrators: We were getting *AV integrators*,” said Robinson. “That’s when we launched Stardraw AV, a package for the AV people, which has now evolved through four generations to arrive at Stardraw Design 7.”

While Stardraw’s focus is solely software, there are three key strands within the organization that stand out. “The people that I meet tend to know our company for one thing—and it’s not always the same thing,” said Robinson. The first is design software, which is where it all began. On the design side, the company is all about the communication of system designs. Integrators use the documentation to communicate to their clients both in-house and out-of-

custom software solutions are built to capture the workflow and business logic of a particular process. “Racks and panels and entire AV systems are actually not that dissimilar in this regard,” Robinson continued. “They’re all systems, made up of manageable numbers of different components, that all need to work together. Our software, off-the-shelf or custom-developed, facilitates exactly that.”

The third thing Stardraw might be known for is control software. The company began working on control in 2004 and released the product in 2006/2007.

While exhibiting at the first ISE (Integrated Systems Europe) show in Geneva in 2004, another exhibitor thought there might be an opportunity to use Stardraw’s design software to control his company’s Ethernet-en-

able to connect to a computer or a network either directly or indirectly.

At about the same time, they noticed the emergence of black boxes offering connectivity between Ethernet networks and standard control protocols like Serial and IR. “The beautiful thing about these boxes was that they were completely dumb,” Robinson explained. “There was no intelligence in the box at all; it couldn’t do anything without software. Something that we always say is that software is useless without hardware, but hardware is also useless without software.” This meant that Stardraw could partner with hardware manufacturers to provide a flexible control solution. “We’re not competing with manufacturers because we’re partnering with them,” he added.

Stardraw's control systems are based on, and benefit from, open architecture. "What's really cool about the open architecture approach is that it's inherently extensible. With Stardraw Control, we've never yet encountered a situation where we have to say, 'No, we can't do that,' because we can sit on the back of anything that a computer can do," said Robinson. "And a computer can do pretty much anything."

As for what's next, the company believes its evolution, as it has been, will continue to be facilitated through the relationships made with people on all sides of business. "From our point of view, our business and our philosophy really is all about partnership; it's about great support and great partnerships," said Robinson. "That's what we do for our customers, and that's what we do with manufacturers and our OEM clients."

Currently, the company is focusing on the Cloud and Mobile technology as what's "next" for the industry. "It seems that there's a certain amount of mystery and mystique about what



the Cloud means," added Robinson. "For me, it's the idea that a virtualized process is out there, somewhere, and what that means for us is that we can take any kind of process and make it secure and responsive and scalable." It's also robust because, in one deployment, data is replicated in three physical locations and two graphical locations, so the system has five times redundancy built in.

"We already offer Cloud-based ser-

vices with the packages that we have, but what we want to do is move forward. I think what's more interesting than Cloud, is Mobile," he stressed.

Robinson added that one of the most challenging things he has seen since Stardraw's beginning is the acceleration in the rate of change. When the iPad first launched in 2010, for example, many people didn't know what to do with it and weren't sure what it was for. Now, there are 100 million units sold. These days, about 70% of the world's computing platforms are iOS or Android. "Mobile and Cloud go hand in hand," said Robinson, "but from our point of view, we have to think about Mobile. This should be the platform you think about first, and then desktop."

As it goes with technology, things will always get smaller, faster and cheaper. Stardraw was born in the early '90s, and has moved with technology and convergence every step of the way. Though the Cloud and Mobile platform shift is huge, the company continues to look ahead for what's relevant to it and its clients. ■